

The percentage paid on the sale of farm and commercial properties or unimproved land is usually higher than the percentage paid for selling a home.

Commissions may be divided among several agents and brokers. The broker and the agent in the firm who obtained the listing usually share their commission when the property is sold; the broker and the agent in the firm who made the sale also usually share their part of the commission. Although an agent's share varies greatly from one firm to another, often it is about half of the total amount received by the firm. Agents who both list and sell a property maximize their commission.

Income usually increases as an agent gains experience, but individual ability, economic conditions, and the type and location of the property also affect earnings. Sales workers who are active in community organizations and local real estate associations can broaden their contacts and increase their earnings. A beginner's earnings are often irregular because a few weeks or even months may go by without a sale. Although some brokers allow an agent a drawing account against future earnings, this practice is not usual with new employees. The beginner, therefore, should have enough money to live on for about six months or until commissions increase.

### Related Occupations

Selling expensive items such as homes requires maturity, tact, and a sense of responsibility. Other sales workers who find these character traits important in their work include motor vehicle sales workers; securities, commodities, and financial services sales representatives; insurance sales agents; and manufacturers' and wholesale sales representatives.

### Sources of Additional Information

Information on license requirements for real estate agents and brokers is available from most local real estate organizations or from the State real estate commission or board.

For more information about opportunities in real estate, contact:

☛ National Association of Realtors, Realtor Information Center, 430 North Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611.

## Retail Salespersons

(O\*NET 49011 and 49999C)

### Significant Points

- Good employment opportunities are expected due to the need to replace the large number of workers who leave the occupation each year.
- Most salespersons work evening and weekend hours, and long hours during Christmas and other peak retail periods.
- Opportunities for part-time work are plentiful.

### Nature of the Work

Whether selling shoes, computer equipment, or automobiles, retail salespersons assist customers in finding what they are looking for and try to interest them in buying the merchandise. They describe a product's features, demonstrate its use, or show various models and colors. For some sales jobs, particularly those selling expensive and complex items, retail salespersons need special knowledge or skills. For example, salespersons who sell automobiles must be able to explain to customers the features of various models, the meaning of manufacturers' specifications, and the types of options and financing available.

Consumers spend millions of dollars every day on merchandise and often form their impressions of a store by evaluating its sales force. Therefore, retailers are increasingly stressing the importance of providing courteous and efficient service in order to remain competitive.

When a customer wants an item that is not on the sales floor, for example, the salesperson may check the stockroom, place a special order, or call another store to locate the item.

In addition to selling, most retail salespersons, especially those who work in department and apparel stores, make out sales checks; receive cash, check, and charge payments; bag or package purchases; and give change and receipts. Depending on the hours they work, retail salespersons may have to open or close cash registers. This may include counting the money; separating charge slips, coupons, and exchange vouchers; and making deposits at the cash office. Salespersons are often held responsible for the contents of their registers, and repeated shortages are cause for dismissal in many organizations. (Cashiers, who have similar job duties, are discussed elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

Salespersons may also handle returns and exchanges of merchandise, wrap gifts, and keep their work areas neat. In addition, they may help stock shelves or racks, arrange for mailing or delivery of purchases, mark price tags, take inventory, and prepare displays.

Frequently, salespersons must be aware of special sales and promotions. They must also recognize possible security risks and thefts and know how to handle or prevent such situations.

### Working Conditions

Most salespersons in retail trade work in clean, comfortable, well-lighted stores. However, they often stand for long periods and may need supervisory approval to leave the sales floor.

The Monday through Friday, 9 to 5 work week is the exception, rather than the rule, in retail trade. Most salespersons work some evening and weekend hours, and long hours during Christmas and other peak retail periods. In addition, most retailers restrict the use of vacation time from Thanksgiving until early January.

This job can be rewarding for those who enjoy working with people. Patience and courtesy are required, especially when the work is repetitious and the customers demanding.

### Employment

Retail salespersons held about 4.6 million jobs in 1998. They worked in stores ranging from small specialty shops employing a few workers, to giant department stores with hundreds of salespersons. In addition, some were self-employed representatives of direct sales companies and mail-order houses. The largest employers of retail salespersons are department stores, clothing and accessories stores, furniture and home furnishing stores, and motor vehicle dealers.

This occupation offers many opportunities for part-time work and is especially appealing to students, retirees, and others looking to supplement their income. However, most of those selling "big ticket"



*Retail salespersons have a thorough knowledge of the products they sell.*

items, such as cars, furniture, and electronic equipment, work full time and have substantial experience.

Because retail stores are found in every city and town, employment is distributed geographically in much the same way as the population.

### Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

There usually are no formal education requirements for this type of work, although a high school diploma or equivalent is increasingly preferred. Employers look for people who enjoy working with others and have the tact and patience to deal with difficult customers. Among other desirable characteristics are an interest in sales work, a neat appearance, and the ability to communicate clearly and effectively. The ability to speak more than one language may be helpful for employment in stores in communities where people from various cultures tend to live and shop. Before hiring a salesperson, some employers may conduct a background check, especially for a job selling high-priced items.

In most small stores, an experienced employee, or the proprietor, instructs newly-hired sales personnel in making out sales checks and operating cash registers. In large stores, training programs are more formal and usually conducted over several days. Topics usually discussed are customer service, security, the store's policies and procedures, and how to work a cash register. Depending on the type of product they are selling, they may be given additional specialized training by manufacturers' representatives. For example, those working in cosmetics receive instruction on the types of products available and for whom the cosmetics would be most beneficial. Likewise, salespersons employed by motor vehicle dealers may be required to participate in training programs designed to provide information on the technical details of standard and optional equipment available on new models. Because providing the best service to customers is a high priority for many employers, employees are often given periodic training to update and refine their skills.

As salespersons gain experience and seniority, they usually move to positions of greater responsibility and may be given their choice of departments. This often means moving to areas with potentially higher earnings and commissions. The highest earnings potential is usually found in selling big-ticket items. This type of position often requires the most knowledge of the product and the greatest talent for persuasion.

Opportunities for advancement vary in small stores. In some establishments, advancement is limited, because one person, often the owner, does most of the managerial work. In others, however, some salespersons are promoted to assistant managers.

Traditionally, capable salespersons without college degrees could advance to management positions. However today, large retail businesses usually prefer to hire college graduates as management trainees, making a college education increasingly important. Despite this trend, motivated and capable employees without college degrees should still be able to advance to administrative or supervisory positions in large establishments.

Retail selling experience may be an asset when applying for sales positions with larger retailers or in other industries, such as financial services, wholesale trade, or manufacturing.

### Job Outlook

As in the past, employment opportunities for retail salespersons are expected to continue to be good because of the many job openings created each year due to the need to replace the large number of workers who transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force. Additional openings will be created by growth in employment of retail salespersons. Employment is expected to increase about as fast as the average for all occupations through the year 2008 due to anticipated growth in retail sales created by a growing population. There will continue to be many opportunities for part-time workers, and demand will be strong for temporary workers during peak selling periods, such as the Christmas season.

During economic downturns, sales volumes and the resulting demand for sales workers usually decline. Purchases of costly items, such as cars, appliances, and furniture, tend to be postponed during difficult economic times. In areas of high unemployment, sales of many types of goods decline. However, because turnover of sales workers is usually very high, employers often can adjust employment levels simply by not replacing all those who leave.

### Earnings

The starting wage for many retail sales positions is the Federal minimum wage, which was \$5.15 an hour in 1999. In areas where employers have difficulty attracting and retaining workers, wages tend to be higher than the established minimum.

Median hourly earnings of retail salespersons, including commission, in 1998 were \$7.61. The middle 50 percent earned between \$6.18 and \$9.84 an hour. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$5.76 and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$14.53 an hour. Median hourly earnings in the industries employing the largest number of retail salespersons in 1997 were as follows:

New and used car dealers .....	\$15.10
Department stores .....	6.90
Miscellaneous shopping goods stores .....	6.70
Family clothing stores .....	6.40
Women's clothing stores .....	6.20

Compensation systems vary by type of establishment and merchandise sold. Salespersons receive hourly wages, commissions, or a combination of wages and commissions. Under a commission system, salespersons receive a percentage of the sales that they make. This system offers sales workers the opportunity to significantly increase their earnings, but they may find their earnings strongly depend on their ability to sell their product and the ups and downs of the economy. Employers may use incentive programs such as awards, banquets, bonuses, and profit-sharing plans to promote teamwork among the sales staff.

Benefits may be limited in smaller stores, but in large establishments benefits are usually comparable to those offered by other employers. In addition, nearly all salespersons are able to buy their store's merchandise at a discount, with the savings depending upon on the type of merchandise.

### Related Occupations

Salespersons use sales techniques, coupled with their knowledge of merchandise, to assist customers and encourage purchases. Workers in a number of other occupations use these skills, including manufacturers' and wholesale sales representatives; services sales representatives; securities, commodities, and financial services sales representatives; counter and rental clerks; real estate agents and brokers; purchasing managers, buyers, and purchasing agents; insurance sales agents; and cashiers.

### Sources of Additional Information

Information on careers in retail sales may be obtained from the personnel offices of local stores, or from State merchants' associations.

General information about retailing is available from:

☛ National Retail Federation, 325 7th St. NW., Suite 1100, Washington, DC 20004. Internet: <http://www.nrf.com>

Information about retail sales employment opportunities is available from:

☛ United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, Education Office, 1775 K St. NW., Washington, DC 20006-1502.

☛ Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union, 30 East 29th St., 4th Floor, New York, NY 10016.

Information about training for a career in automobile sales is available from:

☛ National Automobile Dealers Association, Public Relations Dept., 8400 Westpark Dr., McLean, VA 22102-3591.